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ABSTRACT

Based on one educator's interactions with writing center personnel over the past dozen years--and not based on empirical research--the following are among the most common perceptions that writing center personnel hold with regard to central administration: (1) central administration prefers to keep writing centers powerless and marginalized; (2) central administration is where all the power is concentrated; (3) central administration's distribution of funding support within an institution is unpredictable at best and capricious at worst; (4) faculty rank and the situating of a writing center within a department accrues important prestige in the central administration; (5) major curricular decisions are made in the central administration; and (6) retention, tenure, and promotion decisions are determined primarily by the central administration. It is important therefore to study these perceptions and make a determination about their accuracy. Based on interviews with the central administration, here are some observations that could be useful to writing center directors committed to actively ensuring that their centers are funded adequately. First, administrators have little direct information about writing centers because they do not have time to visit them. Second, administrators think in terms of staffing plans, space allocation, and personnel dollars. Third, in the view of college administration, so long as a program is funded, it is not marginalized. Fourth, central administration does not see departmental affiliation as a prestige issue but as a mechanical, organizational, or logistical issue. (TB)

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PERCEPTIONS, REALITIES, & POSSIBILITIES: CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION AND WRITING CENTERS

Based on my interactions with writing center personnel over the past dozen years, and, I emphasize, not based on any empirical research, the following are among the most common perceptions that writing center personnel hold with regard to central administration:

1. CA prefers to keep writing centers powerless and marginalized.

2. CA is where all the power is concentrated.

3. CA's distribution of funding support within an institution is unpredictable at best, capricious at worst.

4. Faculty rank and the situating of a writing center within a department accrues important prestige in the CA.

5. Major curricular decisions are made in the CA.

6. Retention, tenure, and promotion decisions are determined primarily by CA.

There are other perceptions which also operate, but these are the most common and the ones upon which many writing center decisions about design, mission, staffing and reporting tend to be made. It is important, therefore, to study these perceptions and make a determination about their accuracy.

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To do that, perhaps the best place to go next is Central Administration and talk about its perceptions of writing centers.

1. Actual information, detailed and precise, that CA has about writing centers tends to be fairly sparse, coming forward almost entirely by means of reports. Administrators, by and large, are more burdened with paper pushing and meeting schedules than faculty imagine, so that opportunities to get out and visit campus facilities may be governed by crisis, not by desire to acquire knowledge. The crisis may be a physical plant breakdown, a personnel difficulty, or it may be a more positive crisis, such as an accreditation site visit. But still a crisis and thus a way of limiting and focussing what CA will be looking at and therefore what they will see and not see.

Thick and detailed reports are not the solution to this problem. Rather, careful planning of what goes into the required reports and carefully timed invitations to CA would be a more effective solution. The point is: writing centers have more control over what CA knows about them than is perceived.

2. Central Administration is interested in information that addresses the issues that concern it. These are things like accreditation, accountability (assessment), staffing plans, space allocation, and personnel dollars. Those are the nuts-and-bolts concerns, the daily assignment of administration. It is crucial to understand that.

Thus, a writing center for CA is: space, student use, personnel dollars, productivity, and a program that requires assessment and evaluation on the basis of institutional mission and priorities. Notice that the quality of instruction is in there, but not obviously and not at the head of the list. That

does not mean that quality is not a concern of CA. But the other issues are why CA exists in the first place.

3. Assessment of instructional quality is the business of departments and the faculty of an institution. CA is the place where "big picture" information about assessment is gathered, where the money and time and reporting lines for assessment are addressed. But not the assessment itself.

4. The concept of "marginalization" would be a surprise to CA. If a program is being funded, space provided, salaries paid, assessment and evaluation being conducted, then the assumption of CA is that it is a part of the institution and that some part of the institution's mission is being addressed. Now, that doesn't mean that funds may not be distributed sparingly, that positions may be temporary. But what looks like marginalization from the writing center point of view will be regarded by CA as keeping flexibility available for shifting funds, reallocating staffing positions, redistributing space. In times of budget shortages (and we can expect them for the foreseeable future), flexibility is not only wise, it is required.

"Marginal" then means what can be cut if a budget recision occurs? And they do occur. These decisions are often based on the available unspent or unencumbered funds. A prime target, for example, would be a summer school, if a recision came late in the fiscal year. On the other hand, support service cuts are risky, for they alienate students, reduce retention rates which in turn will reduce income further. But CA may need to be reminded of that.

The situation is not changed by this difference in perceptions. It is still unpleasant and limits options and possibilities. But the understanding of how

to respond to the situation, the development of realistic and effective responses, depends on a clear understanding of how the check-signers perceive the situation. They do not perceive themselves as oppressors and tend to react defensively against such accusations. Even an intransigent, blockheaded CA will react negatively to such accusations.

5. CA considers most evaluation decisions (retention, promotion, tenure) to be primarily made at the department level.
The closest, most accurate, and most comprehensive sense of what is going on in a discipline, what constitutes appropriate and effective scholarship and teaching methodology, what are meaningful professional activities, exists in departments and, in institutions tht have them, divisions or colleges. CA will override recommendations made at lower levels, but infrequently. To be regularly at variance with these recommendations is to court dissension, protest, grievances, and lawsuits, none of which is considered desirable by CA (though we face them daily).

Furthermore, it is in the best interests of good assessment and program review for these determinations to be made by knowledgeable people. CA does have a vested interest in valid and positive assessment outcomes.

6. Departmental affiliation is not seen by CA as a prestige issue but as a mechanical/organizational/logistical issue. Because it is the most common structure it is therefore the best understood. It determines how funding will be channeled, reporting lines established, and evaluation conducted. It is conventional, defined, and therefore not problematic: the line of least resistance. If a less conventional structure is to be pursued, these issues will

have to be sorted out to the satisfaction of CA, and clarity and efficiency should be among the criteria. A frequent difficulty for writing centers is that they do not easily fit the conventional structure and yet are jammed into it because it is familiar to both CA and writing center staff.

An alternative response, also frequent, is to use temporary staffing and soft funding, as much out of inertia (what to do with this odd duck among the various programs?) as out of a desire for flexibility. When in doubt, stall, and these structures are the manifestations of stalling. Once you establish a tenure line and the related evaluation system, you have made a commitment not to move things around. Tenure-line positions mean that the institution is thinking about something for a very long haul. People are in a hurry to get tenure, and they are reluctant to leave once they have it. A tenure-line position is, when you consider, an institutional commitment of at least 20 years' duration. That means, literally, thousands and thousands of dollars in salary and benefits. For CA, whose responsibility is the prudent management of those dollars, it only makes sense to take a long, squinty-eyed look at any request for such commitment. It is generally not a desire to oppress or marginalize anybody.

Related to this responsibility is the one of supervising and adjusting the institutional structure so that all the parts fit together coherently and efficiently. Programs are not looked at in isolation, though the persons who are involved with them may have that perception. For CA, a writing center may be a discrete unit, but not a separate one, one that fits into the whole. They must consider not just the content of the writing center's activities, but where in the organizational structure does it fit? Where should it go? How

will other units be affected? The flow of information? Decision making authority? Funding? Equipment? Space?

Again, departmental affiliation is, superficially, the easiest answer to these questions. In some institutions, a deeper analysis may yield the same answer. But not always.

7. Finally, caprice is complicated and costly. It is very, very seldom what is behind a CA decision. Rather, funding, in whatever form, is at the bottom of *most* CA decisions. Period. All decisions, including tenure, are ultimately budgetary in their implications. Caprice, on the other hand, leads to lawsuits and other difficulties. It creates unusual and time-consuming problems to be solved, distracting CA from the routine work that must be done.

Of course I don't discount Murphy's law and the Stupidity Factor from the decision-making process. But in analyzing why a CA decision has been made, I urge the application of Occam's law: the simplest explanation is the likeliest, and in this case, that means budget.

What then are the implications for writing centers and writing center personnel if we proceed from these observations?

1. The kind of information that writing center directors will need to gather and distribute will not be as closely related to the philosophy and daily functioning of a writing center as it will be to larger, institutional issues. Directors need to be sophisticated enough in their own administrative activities to balance the two levels of knowledge and expertise--theoretical and managerial, pedagogical and budgetary--effectively.

A problem that I see and that I hope will begin to be addressed by our professional literature and organizations is that the professional preparation of writing center personnel is very effective at covering the theoretical and the pedagogical and virtually silent on the managerial and budgetary. We want to strengthen our programs but have almost no good information or understanding of how to do so effectively.

Our idealism, one of the fuels that propels successful and innovative writing centers, is also a problem for us, leading us to misperceive our institutional situations and, frequently, to exacerbate problems by applying the wrong remedy. I would urge that careful study, a lot of talk and legwork, and above all, the consistent requirement of looking at the whole institution, will be far and away the most effective way to end this matter of "marginalization" for writing centers. We need to adopt the principle that we use so often in tutoring: abandon our preconceived notions and look at what is actually there.